

Renaissance Neighborhood Opportunity Center
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INTRODUCTION

Renaissance Neighborhood Opportunity Center [NOC] is a neighborhood-based center committed to assisting women to lead healthy, independent, responsible lives through *counseling* and *education*. Located in the College Hill neighborhood of North St. Louis, the NOC is easily accessible to the more than 175 women in the immediate area. It offers them the initial motivation and opportunity to take the first steps toward a more independent lifestyle and supports them as they gain the self-confidence needed to utilize the more traditional services available in the community.

HISTORY

Renaissance Neighborhood Opportunity Center [NOC] is a project of Renaissance Housing Corporation, Inc., a non-for-profit, 501 (c) (3) association. Renaissance Housing Corporation provides new and rehabilitated housing for persons of low and moderate income.

Renaissance Housing Corporation began in 1978 and was incorporated in 1981. Residents in the Penrose, O'Fallon and College Hill Neighborhoods were alarmed at how quickly urban blight was creeping into North St. Louis, and formed Renaissance. The Renaissance board of directors comes from these three neighborhoods.

The board of directors grew aware that a viable neighborhood is more than bricks and mortar. They realized that social problems needed to be addressed. They started a project--the Neighborhood Opportunity Center [NOC]--to address two areas of need: counseling and education.

The NOC serves the College Hill neighborhood. Foundational work for the NOC was begun in January, 1995. Grant proposals were written to foundations, charitable organizations and individuals to raise funds for the initial operating expenses. The NOC officially opened in July, 1995 and began its involvement with the women of the neighborhood.

The NOC offers a wide array of services and opportunities for the residents of the neighborhood. Staff members have visited homes; provided counseling and guidance; tutored residents for literacy, pre-GED and GED learning levels; and taught computer literacy, resume-writing, keyboarding and Internet courses. NOC staff have presented workshops and talks on job-seeking skills at other neighborhood agencies.

PURPOSE / MISSION

Poverty is a wasting disease. Human lives full of potential and meaning are worn away through the trials of life without sufficient food, clothing, shelter, and without a living wage and meaningful work. Reliance upon the government and social service agencies diminishes the self esteem and sense of dignity of a person with low income. Poverty is cyclic. The system designed to help the poor survive prevents them from becoming self-reliant through convoluted regulations and demeaning practices.

The NOC is founded upon the belief that it is possible to recover from poverty. Improving the mental and spiritual health of a low income person is crucial to his or her ability to become physically and economically healthy. Two critical means for improving mental and spiritual health are counseling and education. The poor are isolated from mainstream American life--disconnected from the world of work and denied access to the global community due to a lack of access to and understanding of the modern technology that runs our political and information systems.

The NOC attempts to redress these injustices by connecting the residents of the College Hill neighborhood with community volunteers, by offering tutoring that will improve reasoning and writing skills, by offering counseling that improves emotional health, and by offering computer classes to give the poor

access to the “information superhighway.” It is very important to teach the poor how to use the tools used by modern society to express ideas and disseminate information. The economically disadvantaged need desperately to have their stories told, their opinions heard, and their insights shared with the wider community.

STATISTICS

Population of College Hill neighborhood:	5,415 persons
Neighborhood residents who have low to moderate incomes:	84.04%
College Hill Apartments tenants with low income:	100%
Tenants with rent subsidized by Section 8 rental assistance:	85%
Tenants that are single mother households:	95%
Neighborhood crime rate in 1984	moderate
Neighborhood crime rate in 1996	high
Number of gangs in neighborhood	5
Number of gang members	150
Neighborhood residents with substance abuse problems	30%
Number of drug houses within 150 yards of the NOC	3
Number of clients NOC has served since July 1995	234
Number of home visits from July 1995-June 1996	176
Number of new clients since June 30, 1996	30

NETWORKING

We believe that the key to revitalizing the College Hill neighborhood is to get more people involved in the community. Residents need to take an active role in the shaping of the neighborhood. The NOC can act as a conduit through which volunteers and agencies in the wider community may assist the neighborhood in its growth and change.

Some of the individuals and organizations we have worked with in our first year include: Rev. Leon Johnson of **North Side Team Ministry**; Director Joli Harris and Sr. Joan Coughlin of **Father Tolton Catholic Community Services**; Elder Solomon Williams of **New Jerusalem Cathedral**; Mary Rolfe of **Grace Hill Water Tower Health Center**; Linda Price of **Grace Hill Business Education Center**; Kenneth White and William Dent of the **Missouri Dept. of Labor and Industrial Relations**; Stephen Westbrook of **St. James Community Center**; Sr. Jackie Toben, SSND, Executive Director of **Let's Start--a support process for women coming out of prison**; **St. Louis Community College--William Harrison Northside Education Center**; and John Posey and Sonya Pelli of the **St. Louis Community Development Agency [CDA]**.